

# ICELANDIC PIONEERS OF 1874

From the Reminiscences of Simon Simonson



Translated by W. KRISTJANSON

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On the tenth of September, 1874, at half past one o'clock, the ship moved down the fjord. The wind blew from the north and there was a rough sea, with flying spray. Outside Drangey, the view was dimmed and the seas ran high. Everybody was sea-sick. Early the following morning we could barely glimpse the West Country mountains and they soon disappeared altogether from view. This was on the eleventh, a Friday. Then a direct course was set for Quebec, where we arrived, safe and sound, on Wednesday the twenty-third, although two of the days at sea had been very bad. The ship's speed varied from seventy-five to 265 miles a day. The distance to the St. Lawrence River was 2194 miles.

After a considerable wait, we proceeded to the Immigration shed. Sigtryggur Jónasson met us there, and immediately assumed the role of guide and interpreter. This gave the people a momentary uplift of the spirit.

That night we moved into the coaches, which the majority thought a considerable novelty, so very different from anything at home. We proceeded to Montreal, where we had a meal, and then went on to Toronto. On the evening of the twenty-fourth we moved into the Immigration shed. We had a long stay there. Our fare was good; at least, there was sufficient beef, but it proved unsuitable food, being too heavy, and the people generally became considerably indisposed, especially the children. However, during all this long journey our family was in good health.

A few of the girls in the group went into domestic service in Toronto.

In Toronto we met with some Icelanders who had arrived the previous year, including Friðjón and his wife, and Baldvin. These visited us on occasion, in the evenings.

Presently we learned that we were to move into a district to the north in the province, where a railroad was under construction. There we would be able to support ourselves and our families. During our stay in Toronto, buildings were being erected for our use at a point along the proposed route of the railway.

We left Toronto at night. We had to proceed on foot through the city for about three miles, and carry our luggage. I carried my little Guðrún, but my Guðmundur walked. I thought the buildings so high and the streets so narrow that the street was like a narrow ravine at home in Iceland, but the travelling was different, for the streets were paved with stone. We arrived at the railroad station about day-break.

The railroad ran north, about eighty miles, to Cobocok, where we had our midday meal, at three o'clock.

The town was newly built. The landscape there was becoming much more unattractive and more stony.

October 9, 1874. Before us lay a journey of fourteen miles, by horse-drawn wagons, over stones and brambles and wet ground. That was a trying journey for the children, who were sick or ailing, and for the women. The jolting of the clumsy wagons on the rough road was fearful. Also, the season had been wet, and nights came on pitch dark. Anybody with sense would have known the effects of this journey would be anything but good, and such proved to be the case. Many of the children collapsed, and also some of the grown-ups, chiefly the old folks.

About midnight the people were dumped out of the wagons, under the trees, in darkness such as I have scarcely seen the like. We knew not where to go, and had the sick children on our hands. At last, after a long and distressing



wait, with the people milling about in the mud, two of our countrymen came, bringing a faint light, and directed us to a hovel which was under construction, and at the building of which a few Icelanders had worked.

Tired and hungry, we arrived at these miserable quarters. There was some food on the table, but only the strongest secured this, while the weak and the sick received nothing. Each thought of self, and of no one else. I could not bring myself to act like a wild beast.

The following day the people were allocated to the newly built huts, which were numbered, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. There was considerable space between them. Our family, and eight others, were assigned to number four hut. It will be left to the imagination what the atmosphere was like inside.

The houses were built thus: the walls and gable ends of logs, and the roof of boards. The beds were one above the other, with end to the wall. It was scarcely possible to sit upright in the side-beds. Such illness prevailed in these huts that the poor children were stricken wholesale.

Sigtryggur's plan was to have a communal table, with all alike sharing expenses. This system, however, did not last. There were those who tried to cook and did not do so well, and there were those who pilfered supplies. . . I do not care to describe it now, after twenty years; this was an unhappy period of my life. Also, we had to wait for our bed-comforters several days. All this was hard on the children, who were continuously taking ill. As for the men they were unused to the work, and all were ignorant of the language. Most bitter of all, for me, it was to see my little Guðrún suffering intensely and to be unable to ease her suffering. She kept nothing down. There was little milk to be had and what little there was, was not good. About nine days from the time Guðrún became ill, God took her to himself, in his merciful embrace. She died at ten o'clock in the evening of Satur-

day, the eighteenth of October. Jón Ivarson made the coffin. She was buried on the twentieth, in Kinmount cemetery. Jón and Jakob Espolin dug the grave and were pall-bearers. Guðrún was a lovely and pleasant child, well developed for her years, and appeared to be endowed with good intelligence, I shall mourn the loss of my loved one as long as I live.

The weather was extremely hot and it was often with a most painful effort that I kept at work, but I forced myself to do so.

The pay was one dollar a day, till the New Year, and ninety cents thereafter. It appears that I worked thirteen days in October; 19½ days in November; twenty-four days in December; 16½ days in January; 14½ days in February; and twelve days in March. During that period I earned \$95.45.

At first the foremen were exceedingly harsh with us, but towards the last they were very well disposed, and preferred to have only Icelanders in their employment, and gave us the best of reports. I worked for a considerable time for one employer, and a short while for two others, until all work ceased for lack of funds.

Sigtryggur and Friðjón set up a store in Kinmount for us Icelanders.

The surrounding country was not at all pretty and it was difficult to cultivate. It was hilly, cut with gullies, stony, and wooded, and it was very sparsely settled. Throughout the district, farm wages were exceedingly low.

We suffered no real mishap during the winter, apart from the grievous infant mortality. Upwards of thirty children must have died, and also upwards of ten grown-ups, chiefly old people. It was a sad time for the bereaved among us.

Jóhannes Arngrímsson came from Nova Scotia, on behalf of the government of that province, to induce people to settle there. Some of our group who had taken land north of Kinmount, but had abandoned the undertaking, decided to go east with Jóhannes. The party

proceeded to Halifax, and then on to the lands selected for them. There they struggled to establish themselves in an unproductive country until 1881, when they moved to Manitoba and N. Dakota.

To return to Kinmount, Valdis and I obtained work a short distance from town, she in domestic service. I paid for my board. This employment lasted a month. We then returned to Kinmount, on the fourth of November, and remained there till Good Friday, 1875.

A few families now decided to pull stakes and move to Lindsay. We bought two teams, and set out on a journey that was not comfortable, for we were perched on top of trunks and chests and a general litter of luggage. The distance would be about fifty miles or more. However, the road, which was through woods, was well travelled.

We paused at noon, and arrived quite late in Lindsay, at the house where we were to lodge for the night, a cold, tumble-down shack. We stayed there three or four nights, and were required to pay for our lodging. Then we obtained a room at a hotel, owned by a Mr. Bell. Mr. and Mrs. Bell were a very elderly couple, and their grown-up children, two sons and two daughters, for the most part managed the place.

The preceding fall, a few Icelandic girls had gone into domestic service in Lindsay and we derived considerable pleasure from their company.

After a week or two, some seven families and a certain number of single men left for Halifax. I would have gone East if I had not lacked the money. As it was we had to content ourselves with staying that summer where we were.

As a matter of fact, we fared rather well, even if we made little money. Wages were exceedingly low, from .50¢ to a dollar for whatever arduous toil there might be, but many things were rather cheap, except flour and clothes. The work was chiefly at saw-mills, digging gardens, and heavy farm work. Frimann Bjarnason and Kristján Jónsson worked at mills on and off that sum-

mer. They had acquired quite good command of the language.

The town, which was small, was rather pretty. A river ran through it. Draw-bridges permitted steamboats to ply back and forth on the river. There were several sawmills. Perhaps four of these were destroyed by fire during that summer.

Our room was in the attic, over a large hall. Service was held in the hall twice every Sunday, and there was frequently singing and playing at other times. The door of our room overlooked the street. This was often unpleasant, not the least when somebody was ill. On one occasion both K. J. and my son Guðmundur were down with the measles at the same time. This was not pleasant, for the room was very small. There was no hospital in Lindsay at that time.

The work which I first obtained was hauling logs to the saw-mill, and clearing away from the saw. This work was hard, and the employment uncertain. I also worked on a farm, six miles out, and did not like it there. Consequently, I did not complete my time and was done out of my pay, small as it was — fifty cents a day.

That spring was considerably more pleasant for us. There were a few Icelandic girls in the town and it was their custom to foregather at our little dwelling place.

That summer Helgi Jónsson came from Iceland. He made his abode with us, and when we left he remained in our lodgings.

My boss from the previous winter offered me work far to the west in the province, stating that some Icelanders were employed there. I agreed to go, and we left towards evening. On arrival at our destination, I was directed to a fine hotel. I did not sleep that night, for I discovered that I had not been told the truth. In the morning I started back, for I feared that I would be defrauded of my pay. I walked fast to the vicinity of Uthall and then took the train to Lindsay, paying 75¢ for my fare. I was dead-tired, after walking all day along the

railroad, hungry and a little poorer than when I set out.

That same summer, five delegates, Sigtryggur, Kristján, Skapti, and two others, proceeded out West, to Manitoba, to prospect for land for the settlement of our people. They selected New Iceland, territory that has not proved up to expectations.

Some of the delegates returned, and the people, who had scattered to various parts of Ontario, were assembled at one point.

Many were loathe to venture such a great distance. Indeed we were rather well situated in Lindsay. The people were good to us, and often helpful, but there was little work and the pay was low, and future prospects poor.

On the twenty-first of September, late in the day, we set out from Lindsay. The people there much regretted our leaving, especially the owners of the room in which we had lived during the summer. No doubt this was partly because most of the young women left with us. Some had already gone.

We proceeded by train to Toronto, where we remained a few days, awaiting the assembly of others of our scattered countrymen. There is nothing of note to report from Toronto, except that the English people thought that we had made progress during our absence and that we had improved in appearance.

From Toronto we left by rail, about noon, on the twenty-fifth of September, 1875. On the way to Sarnia, a distance of about 250-60 miles, there were beautiful towns and attractive settlements.

At Sarnia we stopped overnight. Everything was extraordinarily expensive there, accommodation for one person cost a dollar, even if there were three to share it. This was more than I was accustomed to pay at hotels.

From Sarnia we set out by steamer on the following day. When cargo goods, luggage, and other litter had been stacked on board, and a quantity of livestock, including horses, cattle, pigs, sheep, and poultry had been squeezed in, our turn came and we were packed like sardines

on top of the luggage. No one was permitted to leave his place, so we were compelled to sit there and endure the stench of the livestock. The boat was so small and so unstable that two of the crew were continuously on the go with two sand-barrels, rolling them against the list. The owners' purpose was obviously to make as much profit as possible, and they gave no thought to the passengers' comfort. Who would believe that these conditions could have been tolerated! In addition, we met with rough weather, and all this we had to suffer for the duration of the voyage to Duluth, which lasted almost five days.

Duluth proved to be a very small place, comparable to a small trading village in Iceland.

The journey was resumed by rail, across Minnesota to the Red River, at Fisher Landing. We were now well-rid of the pigs, with their stench. The landscape was in many places rather ugly, with rocky ravines, ruined houses, sand-hills and stony heights. There was not much of forest.

On our way west we changed trains and we had a lengthy wait. We were packed overnight into a tumble-down smithy. The food was of poor quality and unpalatable. Furthermore, the system of serving, or the lack of it, was unpardonable; there was a rush for the victuals and each grabbed what he was able to reach. In the van of the stampede were the single men, who had only their own stomach to think of, which most of them did faithfully. Others, who wished to retain the manners of civilization, obtained very little, and were forced to go hungry. There was also the fact that those who had wives and children to look after were not always able to be on hand when food was distributed. There was much comment on the greedy behaviour of the offenders, on a journey that was sufficiently taxing in itself, especially for frail old persons, and the women and the children. No one looked to the needs of the people. Those who stood closest to Taylor, and were able to express themselves in the English lang-

uage, looked to their own comfort. The evening before our departure from Toronto, Sigtryggur had parted company with us, to proceed to Iceland as government immigration agent. Friðjón was now chief assistant to Taylor, but Friðjón was young and inexperienced.

We reached the Red River late in the afternoon. The weather was extremely wet and the ground was mud. Here was the end of steel, and a town was forming, and the livery stable and even most of the homes were tents.

Then began the process of packing the people into boats, which were flatboats, steamer-towed. That is, the majority were allocated to the flatboats; the elect were given room on board the steamer. Those on the boats had no place except on top of the mass of goods and luggage, and were without cover. Thus we travelled for several days, for there were many stops for the purpose of unloading goods and taking on board wood for the boilers. To make matters worse, the river had become so shallow, that the steamer grounded frequently, and it was often re-floated with difficulty. This meant much wading and our journey was slow and laborious. When assistance was required, many of our company made themselves scarce, not least the single men.

Towards evening we landed at the junction of the Assiniboine, south of the Hudson's Bay Company buildings. That same night, and on the following day, a few of our number unloaded the boats, although we were not in the best of condition for the work. The pay, however, which was three dollars, made up for that. To this much, for such a short time, we were not accustomed.

We were taken to the Immigration shed, which was not large, or in any way a remarkable building. There we were quartered for the few remaining nights until the seventeenth of October, 1875, when the journey was resumed.

Winnipeg was then a very insignificant little town, with few noteworthy buildings. I saw, in passing, one brick building, not pretentious; two brick-

facéd buildings, not well constructed; three or four hotels, and many log houses. The Hudson's Bay Company had most of the trade. Grasshoppers had destroyed all cultivation for three years past, so that it was necessary to bring in all supplies for the few souls who maintained themselves there, and were nearing the end of their tether.

The delay in Winnipeg was for preparing the so-called boats for the journey. These flatboats could not be rowed and were subject to little control. They drifted at the mercy of the current, regardless of whether it meant life or death. Indeed, the more prudent in our company did not view this means of transportation with much favor, and predicted that all would be lost.

Nevertheless, the work of preparation was pushed, and the boats loaded. We had some supplies for our destination, for all our leaders were not so heedless as to rely on our subsisting entirely on the forest and the lake, even if there was an abundance of both.

The leaders' lack of forethought, as many realized afterwards, when too late, was almost incredible. The people suffered for years to come from the improvident way in which preparations were made for the settlement. It was indeed a hazardous undertaking to move out into the wilderness, far from all settlement, and in the face of winter.

Several unattached young ladies stayed behind in Winnipeg, where they secured employment in domestic service. Some female children remained, too, and also a married couple, Björn Skagfjörð and his wife, because of the wife's illness. As for the main part of the group, these were required to proceed to the site of the proposed settlement, and to begin immediately on the work of cultivation; else they would have to pay the expenses of their journey out, and be left to fend for themselves, with no aid from the government loan.

Whether or not it is correct as stated by Guðlaugur Magnússon in his pioneering article in the *Almanak* of 1899,

that we left Winnipeg on the seventeenth,\* which was on a Sunday, at least it is not correct that we started early in the morning; we did not leave till about noon, or later. The number of the flatboats, as given, nine is probably correct. The tenth boat was a York boat. There the "better-class" people were given accommodation.

The current in the Red River is not swift, except after a sudden spring thaw, and in a rainy season, but the river is very winding and there are three rapids one worse than the other two. These rapids are sufficiently dangerous, even for serviceable craft in the hands of persons familiar with their navigation. What then of ourselves! Large stones and rocks left no margin of safety. Nevertheless, due to the marked energy of a few persons, including two guides who accompanied us to below the Rapids, about twelve miles from Winnipeg, the flotilla arrived safely at the mouth of the Red River on the twenty-first of October. On the same day the steamer Colville towed us on our way to Willow Point.

When the Colville was taking us in tow, its propeller damaged one of the flatboats, the one to which I had been allocated. The boat filled immediately, but all the goods were saved, although they were wet.

A stiff breeze blew from the south, and all the select folk moved on board the steamer, while the rest remained on the flatboats.

We were dropped by the Colville some distance off-shore. The captain, perhaps unduly cautious, would not risk moving in to the shallows. We were left in a difficult situation: one flatboat was water-logged and there was a considerable rise to the waves.

Our immediate objective was the inlet connecting the lake and the so-called Willow Tarn. We were aided a little by the breeze, which blew partly on our

quarter; otherwise we would not have succeeded in reaching our objective.

Every effort was now put forth, and we made our way inshore, on to the Willow Tarn, and along it, to the isthmus or gravel ridge. There we passed the night.

Then all the goods were lugged across the point, loaded on to the York boat, and taken to Gimli Bay. This was no small distance, and the task entailed several days of hard work.

Unequal was the effort put forth by the various members of the group. Some persons made themselves scarce, while others were unable to do anything because of indisposition, which in some cases may have been feigned. Some considered the work beneath their dignity. As a result, the task fell to the lot of comparatively few persons.

While we were moving the goods and supplies, we were troubled by exposure to wet.

The flatboats were broken up. The boards were intended for use in doors and door-frames; also for the floors in the homes of the leaders. It soon became evident that distinction was made between persons in the group.

No one possessed fishing nets, and our only means of shelter were some derelict tents, all ragged and torn, which Taylor had obtained on loan from the Hudson's Bay Company. These became our first habitation in our promised land, and into them we moved our cook-stoves.

It was difficult to move along the shore, on account of the fallen trees that reached out into the lake, so one had either to wade out into the water or to force one's way through the undergrowth with its fallen trees in order to travel from the landing places to the site of the settlement. This was especially difficult for those who had children as well as luggage.

There was no clearing in the woods where the tents had been set up, but, as a matter of fact, this was all to the good, for the tattered tents afforded very little protection, and one needed the shelter of the trees. The elect had the best tents;

\* The daily Free Press refers to the party leaving on the sixteenth of October, 1875.—W. K.



John Taylor's tent was commodious, and the tents of his brother William and of some others in the group were fairly good, but many were less fortunate.

It snowed a little during the first night, and there was a light frost; frosts continued and grew more intense.

When the goods had been conveyed, by slow degrees, to our chosen location, now called Gimli, the building of the log-houses was begun. But at this time I took ill, and for two weeks I lay in my miserable quarters. I was sore from toil and exposure, and my condition was not improved by the unappetizing food. This illness caused a serious set-back to my work, for each person had enough to do, attending to his own.

Our family shared an old tent with Erlendur Olafsson and Ingibjörg and their son Andres, who was of an age with our Guðmundur. The two families were thus equal in numbers, but Erlendur had a little more money than I had.

When I was able to crawl out of bed, Erlendur and I turned our thoughts to building. It was in the first week of November that we began work. The other settlers had already laid claim to their lots, for indeed a large city was to arise on this little spot, and we were compelled to locate in the outskirts. We located to the south of the others, and knocked up a shack, about twelve feet square, and man-high, of rails which with difficulty we had managed to drag to the site. We topped the rafters with withered grass-rubbish from a low spot nearby, and plastered the chinks with clay. The door was in the middle of the east wall, with a half-size window on either side. There were two beds along each side-wall, made of rails that had been trimmed a little. The stove was in the centre. We thought this a delightful abode in comparison with our ragged tent.

We moved into our new home on Saturday, the sixth of November. My Valdis was then not well.

On the eighth of November a fairly large number of men started work for John Taylor, on the erection of a building

which was to be good-sized, warm, and in every respect well built. William Taylor, who had already constructed a shelter for himself, was the chief carpenter. The walls were double and very thick, and the space in between filled with clay. There was a ground floor and an upstairs. Altogether, the building, especially in comparison with the shacks of the others, was quite impressive.

This work lasted a good fortnight. The pay was \$1.25 a day, and was in kind through the government loan.

Pending the completion of the building, Taylor continued to live in his tent, despite snow and prevailing frosts.

As previously mentioned, cook-stoves were included with the necessities which we brought in with us. Erlendur and I joined in buying one. We made immediate payment almost in full, and then my funds were exhausted.

The provisions which we brought in with us included the following items: flour (not of good quality); potatoes (which froze); pemmican, and wheat. The wheat had to be ground in iron mills, a task both difficult and slow. As for the flour thus produced, the women found it unsuitable for bread-making, and, indeed, as made by some, the bread was not fit for human consumption. There was also some coffee, in half pound lots, and beans.

Our supplies were not greatly augmented by the fish which we were able to catch, for none of us possessed fishing tackle. Lacking too, on our part, was the necessary knowledge of how to go about lake-fishing. Nevertheless, we were able to catch a few.

Neither the townsite nor the surrounding country had been surveyed, so that the buildings that were erected had to be sited approximately. During the winter, however, the surveyors came, and surveyed both the townsite and the country around. The townsite, which was not a large one, was called Gimli.

Deaths were frequent among both grown-ups and children, but the casualties were proportionately greater among the children. It was a miracle that any-

one survived the hardships and the suffering to which we were subjected: hardships of travel; poor accommodation; food generally unsatisfactory and particularly so for the children and the ailing. Nor was there a doctor available in case of need. It was indeed rashness, thus to endanger the peoples' lives, and the people themselves lacked imagination in taking health precautions.

I mentioned previously that my Valdís had not been well, but I did not state the cause. On the twenty-ninth of November, 1875, about half past one, she gave birth to a boy. He was christened on the ninth of December and named Gunnlaugur. He was called away on the fifteenth of December, a fortnight old, and was buried on the following day. Valdís was then on her feet again, and as well as could be expected.

My Guðmundur and Andres cut wood for the stove, and managed well for their age. Erlendur and I often worked for others. Community life was passable. Thus time progressed, if slowly.

We had to make the most of our small supplies. I shall enumerate just as I wrote it at the time what I obtained for Christmas from the store that had been set up for distribution of supplies, in order to give an idea of with what little we had to content ourselves. To begin with, there was no white sugar, and brown sugar was not available till on the third day preceding Christmas. My list is: six pounds of brown sugar; two pounds of pemmican;  $5\frac{1}{4}$  pounds of wheat; one pound of currants; one pound of soda; three pounds of soda biscuits; one-half pound of coffee; two pounds of beans. From these purchases one and all can see that the men and women in the first years of the New Iceland settlement did not live in luxury.

Fríðjón Friðriksson looked after the distribution and sale of supplies. The government advanced the money as a loan, and the lands were to be security. For this reason Taylor urged that we should move on the land as soon as possible.

We possessed no means of transport

and had to haul or carry things ourselves. Before the Advent season there were severe frosts, ranging as low as  $40^{\circ}$  below zero, or more, and the snow-fall was heavy. There were no roads through the forest, and what with the deep snow and fallen trees, we found it scarcely possible, even when unencumbered, to travel, except on the lake. It was thus impossible for us to move on our lands in the depth of winter.

Those who were on the most intimate terms with Taylor acquired the best located lots, those in the townsite and to the south, along the waterfront. They went about this very quietly, before many knew what was happening. Thus they had things more convenient than those who had to carry all their necessities some distance inland, and over muddy and difficult trails. They had this in mind.

Supplies began to run low, and about the middle of December Taylor went to Winnipeg. Two sleigh-loads of supplies arrived at the end of the month, including twelve sacks of wheat, but these loads were small. The lake route was not yet feasible, fodder for the horses had to be carried and the freighting equipment was inadequate, there being no boxes on the sleighs, merely rails or planks. Deep snow made travelling difficult. This kind of freighting was expensive.

The following men took turns at carrying the mail: Sigurður Kristofersson, Kristjan Jonsson, Benedikt, and others. Very few in the settlement received any benefit from this mail service except John Taylor and his brother, William, for we were isolated in a strange land and few could read the English papers.

Occasionally, during the winter, Taylor held religious services, for he was a good and God-fearing man, despite what has been said about his lack of forethought.

During the winter, too, those who were most closely associated with Taylor sometimes gathered in his home. Otherwise there were, to my knowledge, no concerts that year.

Incidentally, Taylor's house, which had received such special attention, did not prove as well-constructed as was believed. When spring came, it developed a list and the roof leaked.

Between Christmas and the New Year we carried dry wood out on the lake, to build a huge pyre for the burning out of the Old Year.

On New Year's Eve the night was still and extremely frosty. The fire was lit and as soon as the blaze gave sufficient warmth, men and women, as many as were able to, thronged on the scene. Everybody enjoyed himself greatly. William Taylor, who was then about sixty years of age, was dressed to impersonate the Old Year. He was a sight to behold in his apparel. He wore a tarpaper hat, two feet high or better, a beard of hair of rabbit fur, and a white smock so voluminous as to make him seem a giant. He had a walking stick and carried a bottle and a wine glass. The latter he passed around freely, but there was a rub: the bottle was empty. He was very witty and his entertainment was good. Finally he was carried away and he disappeared from the story. Then the twelve New Year's sprites appeared on the scene, clad in white and decked with rose-red ribbons. They acted in their various comic scenes. Then the people returned to their homes, thinking the entertainment a success. None had far to go, and there was plenty of wood for heating the shacks, which was all to the good, for the frost was very severe.

After this the men began generally to build on their lands, which they had selected, mostly on sight unseen. Some of these lands were miles away, and the snow was very deep. I think that no one had the least idea what he was doing, not even the leaders, except for the one purpose in mind: to settle along the lake.

As for the worth of the land, there was no thought given to that. All could see that the land was wooded, but no one thought about the quality of the soil, or about the mud. Indeed, the soil proved rather poor.

The houses were built on snow, located

in many instances where they should not have been, and they were but roughly constructed. The majority were keen to get on their lands as soon as possible, and set about clearing the forest, so that there might be seeding in the spring. Meanwhile, Taylor continued with his urging.

Those who secured the lake front lots were the best off. Their lands were more accessible and comparatively dry. It was thus easier to move about on them. Also, they were conveniently located for fishing.

I was unlucky and was not able to secure land less than a mile or 1½ miles from a landing place. As yet we did not possess the boats, but certain tub-like craft materialized the following summer. Also, we acquired some fishing nets. My land was fully six miles south of Gimli, up from Skapti Arason and Indriði. Erlendur Olafsson was nearer the lake.

Our choice of lands was not of the best, as may be expected, since no one knew how to appraise them, and, furthermore, they were covered with snow. Our farms were difficult to reach, and the buildings on them were not erected without painful effort.

Of course, we cooperated with each other in the building of our homes, but what trudging there was, and what toil there was, straining to move the logs and all our other necessities! Also, the food was insufficient and not of the best.

Valdis, although not at all well, undertook a journey to Winnipeg on February the twenty-sixth, to obtain work. She travelled on one of the flat-bottom sleds used for freighting goods. With her went Kristbjörg Sigurbjörnsdóttir, then a young girl. They both gave an unfavorable account of their journey, what with the cold and the character of their overnight accommodation.

I took ill on the sixteenth of March and was confined to my bed for a few days. What little nursing was possible, Ingi-björg, Erlendur's wife gave me.

A letter arrived from Valdis on the ninefeenth. She had then obtained work in domestic service.

The time had now come for us to move on our lands, or, to be more precise, for lands which we hoped would be ours, for in many cases full possession was never acquired. Erlendur and I had built a house together, for we owned the cook-stove in common, and Ingibjörg prepared the meals for me and my Guðmundur. We moved in on the first of April, or shortly after. The weather was cold and the snow still lay heavy on the ground. Because of this, and because of our lack of the requisite equipment, the move was accomplished only with difficulty. Of course, it was possible for the sleds to travel on the lake, but they were so heavy, being made of green wood, and so poorly constructed that all that one person could do was to pull them empty.

Many small sleds had also been built, and at this time almost every person seen on the move had a sled in tow or a pack on his back.

About the tenth of April, I began the building of my house, with four men to help. I had already cut the logs required, and the work of building took two days.

The snow had subsided but little, and fresh snow fell at the beginning of May, and frosts continued until June. On the ninth of May there was a thunder-storm, with an extremely heavy downpour of rain. We were unable to keep a stitch dry in the clayey leakage of Skapti's newly plastered house. The rain commenced about bed-time, and we stood nearly knee-deep in water for most of the night. We were unable to protect our bed-clothes from the rain, and they were soaked. Such was the comfort of most of the homes at that time, and this state of affairs continued for some years to come, in a number of cases.

Then commenced the seeding of beans and potatoes. It was rather difficult work clearing the forest and burning the trees, for the ground was very wet. Hoeing was difficult, too, for the ground was a solid tangle of roots.

The yield was small, and in addition there were a great many destructive small creatures to spoil the crop.

About the middle of June the potatoes

were planted. It had not been possible to bring the seed in before, as the ice remained on the lake till the twenty-fourth of May.

After the middle of June, Mundi and I went to Winnipeg. My Valdís was then employed at a boarding-house. She was not happily situated, for the work was too hard. In addition to that, she was defrauded of a goodly portion of the wages promised her, which was in keeping with what often happened during those first years.

Then we set up a tent and took in boarders, but the undertaking was not profitable; consequently I obtained work in connection with a large ditch which was then under way along Main Street. The work was exceedingly hard and we were driven relentlessly, so that only the strong could stand it. Later I worked for Taylor at making flat-boats for the party of Icelanders whose arrival from the homeland was then anticipated. The wages were not high, and nowhere else were they high, but generally they were better for women in domestic service than elsewhere — for at that time there was little prosperity in the land.

On the eighth of August, Sigtryggur arrived in Winnipeg, with the first group of Icelanders to arrive that summer, numbering upwards of 750. Later, on the fifteenth of the month, Halldór Briem arrived with nearly 450. I mention the names of these two for they were the conductors of the groups. It may well be imagined that we who had been away from home for two years, and not in the best of circumstances, welcomed this addition to our group.

The new-comers were not much better off on their arrival than we had been when we first came to this part of the country, except for the fact that summer was not far advanced when they came. Their group was much larger, and their baggage many times greater than ours, but they had to rely on the same inadequate means of transportation. They were complete strangers to the manner of life and the methods of work, which differed totally in the Old Country. Many

were ill from the effects of their long journey, which they had made without a break, travelling by way of England, while we proceeded direct to Quebec.

I rough-built a boat and purchased various articles, including a gun, a stove (which had been used, but was strong, and which we kept seventeen or eighteen years and was afterwards used by my brother Jónas); a saw, and various other articles. I also bought two young pigs, but both died, for they did not thrive on their diet of fish.

The second group left on the twentieth of August. We three, in our tub-boat, followed a few days after, and caught up with the party at the mouth of the Red River. We had been favored with good weather that far, but at this point we were caught in a thunderstorm and the rain came down so heavily that I could scarcely keep up with the bailing. Nevertheless, I considered our small craft vastly superior to our boxes of the year previous, for I was able to steer it.

Towards evening of the following day we passed the Gimli party. Crowded in their boxes, or flat-boats, they looked most uncomfortable. All the other lake-craft had already proceeded north.

I had a brief conversation with the people, and then pursued my course to the west, along the sandy beaches. It began to blow from the north and I was compelled to seek shelter of the woods along the shore.

We put up for the night, and had a bad time of it, as on many another night, because of the flies and the wet. After another day's journey we arrived at Erlendur's place.

During the ensuing period, it rained often, so that the people who had not yet shelter suffered considerable discomfort.

I finished the roof on my house, and moved in about the twenty-third of September. I named the place Skógar (Woods). It was rightly named for the land was for the most part heavily wooded. The site on which the house was built proved rather wet, and the

house itself was never free from leakage.

The settlement began to grow up around us, two Johns to the south, one to the west, and other settlers as well. To the north was the school-section. All the settlers gave their farmsteads Icelandic names.

Jón, who called his place Laufás, proved an excellent neighbor. He was one of the best to do of the party on arrival, but he suffered heavy losses; his house burned down and he met with other mishaps. In addition, he had many to support. Thus, much of his substance filtered away. As a matter of fact, I relinquished my pre-emption in his favor.

Conditions were appreciably better in our part of the settlement during the second winter. I was able to get some supplies, including four bags of flour, and we were able to do a considerable amount of fishing. Elsewhere the small-pox raged, and many suffered, but the plague did not hit us hard.

Near the beginning of November, two flat-boats were stranded along the shore; one loaded with potatoes, the other with a variety of supplies, including flour. Consequently, we had mainly frozen and spoiled potatoes that winter, for the potato crop that summer had been rather small.

There was no milk, but we now had got on to the way of catching rabbits, and, also, I shot some ducks. We did not go hungry, but the food was not always inviting.

Now the task at hand was to cut boards with a cross-cut saw, an article which was possessed by few, and to clear the forest. Tending the nets took much time, especially for the single-handed. Then there was the interminable carrying, which played out completely those far from the lake, but was comparatively easy for those located near it. The lake continued to be the chief source of our food supply.

The winters were much more pleasant than the summers, because in the summertime all roads were impassable, and the fierce swarm of flies was scarce.



ely endurable. The first two winters were hard, but the winter of 1877-'78 was exceptionally good.

I caught a goodly supply of fish every winter, after the first, when I did not catch many. Sometimes I fished directly off-shore; sometimes at the mouth of the Red River, and occasionally up north, at Big Island. I had to be my own beast of burden to haul the catch, and this was arduous on such distances.

Towards the end of July, 1877, the cows arrived, 250 of them. They were brought from Minnesota, no trifling distance. We were required to meet the herd and to assist driving it through the woods. We had been without milk for two years and I was not loathe to help. Our journey took three days, for the road was bad. By the time we got through to Willow Point, we were considerably fatigued.

The cows were allotted at Willow Point. The men were separated into groups according to their number of children, or according to the difficulty of their circumstances, but mostly on the former basis. Then each in turn was allowed to select one cow. I was in the fourth or fifth group and when it came to our turn much more than half the herd was gone. At this point I did not like the look of things. All the cows which I had fancied and had a drop of milk in them, were gone. I was certainly feeling badly about it when I spied a broken-tailed five or seven year old, of a good average size. She was red on the flanks; had rather fine horns, and a white star on her forehead. The flaw was that she was virtually dry and gave a mere cupful on arrival at home. However, her yield increased and went up to three pints, and the good creature became one of my staunchest household pillars. She was beautiful in appearance, docile, and sagacious. We called her Búbót, (freely, Bountiful).

Late in the following month of August, Jón of Laufas loaned to me the price of a cow which I purchased from Skapti. She cost thirty dollars, but proved sterile, so we slaughtered her

and sold half the carcass to Magnús and Rósa.

Haymaking was difficult. Only small natural openings here and there in the forest were fit for cutting, and there the grass was full of sticks and other rubbish, and the ground was wet. The hay had to be carried on forks, or on barrows, carried by two persons. It was stacked in hummocks, on the spot, and then brought in during the winter. It was not possible in my case to use horses or oxen, even if I had possessed them, which I did not, but in some few places elsewhere the hayland was more accessible.

Of books, I brought only my Bible and the *Passion Hymns* from home. The first winter I was able to buy only Dr. Peturs' three books, which Sigfús bound, and the Old hymn book, and three lays. In addition, I subscribed to *Framfarir* (Progress). This was all our provender for mind and spirit, but we were happier then than later, when we had acquired more.

On the twenty-first of August my Valdis went to Winnipeg for work, but her stay was short and on the twenty-eighth of September Arni Sveinsson and I left on our trip to bring her home.

The journey to the city took us a day and a night, the best time in which I ever made it. On the thirtieth, which was Sunday, we started for home. We stayed overnight at a point on the river a little below Monkman's place. The three of us slept in the boat and had a cowhide for cover. The weather had turned colder, but the wind did not blow through Arni's hide. On the following days we reached home.

During this period we had two cows, but their yield was small.

Life was different now, although we did not possess plenty. Indeed, we lacked many things. Our attempts at raising crops often failed, because of the host of destructive creatures in the woods. The potato crop was an exception. On one occasion I harvested about 150 (pailfuls?) of potatoes. I was not able to sell any of this crop, but we required a great

deal of potatoes to go with the fish, and potatoes served as fodder for the cow.

The soil was a tangle of roots down to clay and was difficult to cultivate with the one implement available, the hoe. One worked hard all day, with but little to show for it. The roads were impassable, so that draught animals were of little use. In any event, these were possessed by only a few, and their use was chiefly in winter.

In October of 1876, we took Guðrún Jóhannsdóttir from Jóhanna Thorbergsdóttir, who had a struggle to maintain her four children and an aged mother. She had lost her husband, and a very promising son, Paul. I have not made a note of how long we kept the girl. Also, in the spring of 1877, we took Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir and her child. They remained with us on into the following winter.

On the fourteenth of September, 1877, Lord Dufferin visited Gimli.

On Saturday, the sixteenth of March, 1878, at four o'clock in the afternoon, Valdís gave birth to a daughter. Rebecca Johnson was in attendance. The child was christened on Palm Sunday, by Reverend Jón Bjarnason, and named Jóhanna Guðrún.

The house at Laufás burned down at noon on March 30th. Two women were at home at the time, one of them with an infant, and virtually nothing was saved. In the circumstances, we tried to help, and Arni and Guðrún came to stay with us, with their son Jón, who was then in his first year. It did not take long to rebuild. The people were always good neighbors.

On the day of the fire at Laufás our Búbót calved. Her udder was extremely large, and her yield was rich.

Jón Magnússon and Jón Sigurjónsson possessed the farms immediately to the south of us. They were both poor, so that it was sometimes necessary to give them a portion of our meagre supplies. Erlendur and Ingibjörg, who lived nearer to the lake, were both frugal, and they prospered. Little Andres, their son, grew to manhood, and was married.

Skapti Arason and Indriði Indriðason, who owned lands by the lake, had good hayland. A narrow inlet ran up to Indriði's home, and I had a landing place there for my boat. Skapti was located a little farther to the south, on an inlet called Húsavík. Sometimes I drew my boat ashore there, but the distance was greater, which was a consideration when carrying things.

My last year in the settlement was the most difficult for obtaining hay. I owned little meadow-land and my pastures were in the woods, and they were insufficient to maintain a significant number of cattle.

Sometimes I alternated with Valdís in going to Winnipeg to earn money for necessities, but it was a long and a hard pull, and earnings remained small.

The people in the settlement had to rely on the outside world for many things, while neither fish nor any other local produce had an outside market. Trips to Winnipeg were numerous and the travelling was difficult.

The members of Reverend Jón Bjarnason's congregation abided the difficult conditions longer than did the followers of Reverend Paul Thorlaksson. It was the Reverend Paul who opened the eyes of the people to the miserable prospects in the country, while abundant good land was to be had elsewhere. Discontent took hold in the settlement and large numbers moved to North Dakota. Those who left, forfeited their cows and stoves and the other items furnished through the government loan.

In the summer of 1880 a few men went to look for land elsewhere in Manitoba. S. Kristofersson, Kristján Jónsson, W. Taylor, and S. Snædal formed one group; the Arnason brothers, Skapti Arason, Skúli, and Halldór, another. They walked all the way, proceeding south to Emerson, west to Pilot Mound, and then north to Argyle. They apparently took a shorter route on their return but all this walking must have been strenuous.

These men selected land for themselves and for others, and there followed the heaviest outward movement that

took place in the settlement, for the men mentioned were all prominent in the colony.

At the beginning of March, 1879, Valdis left for Winnipeg for work, travelling with Old Jón of Laufás. During his absence, I attended to his stock. This entailed two trips a day for me. On his return, Jón brought me a sack of flour as recompense for my work. This was most acceptable, for frequently one had to be very saving on flour.

When Valdis left, we placed our Guðrún with Sigríður, who lived a good mile away, to the north of Kristján Kærsted. I had to take her milk over every day, and soon I began to tire of doing this. What I felt more keenly was that every time I took leave of the child, the tears would come to her eyes. After a month or this, I decided to take her home. Well do I remember how, on starting out with my burden in my arms I was at the same time both happy and unhappy: happy in having my little child with me (she was then a year old and quite promising) and unhappy because I could not hope to give her all the care she ought to have. I travelled south along the road with my burden in my arms, and then rested in the shade of an oak, for the day was hot. Then I cut straight through the woods, along an opening where I was wont to cut hay, and so home.

Things turned out better than I had expected. My boy and I took turns at minding Guðrún. Nevertheless, our task was often difficult. Although Guðmundur helped me all that could be expected, the burden of the work, inside and outside, fell on me. My neighbors offered to do the washing and the baking, but I soon discovered that to take things over and to call for them took more time than if I did the work myself. Then there was the gratuity to consider. Consequently, I undertook to do all the work myself.

About midsummer, I went to Winnipeg, to bring Valdis home. She had been working on a steamer plying to Brandon. While I was away, Ingibjörg, Erlendur's

wife, looked after things. Valdis had earned but little.

When I was in Winnipeg, there was an extremely violent thunderstorm, with a vivid display of lightning.

I found it difficult to secure sufficient hay for my few cattle. My fields were continually being overrun by cattle, who cropped the grass and cut up the ground.

That fall, Jón Magnússon and I set out for Winnipeg, travelling by road. Cold weather had set in, and the day was bright and frosty. By the time we reached Netley Creek, night was closing in. Indians only lived in that vicinity, but we decided to ask for lodging. This was refused, so we continued on our way.

A maze of ponds and runnels extended out from the river which made it difficult for strangers to keep direction. I was irritated by the refusal of lodging, and strode ahead recklessly. I had a good sized stave in my hand, secured from the woods, and we carried our packs on our backs. Suddenly, I found myself sinking through soft mush. I floundered on about the length of a house, and the mush began to thin out. Then I took a back-stroke to the edge where I had broken through. Meanwhile, Jón had lost his head completely and was shouting. I told him shouting was of no use since everybody was asleep; he should try to crawl to the edge and grab hold of my stick. This he succeeded in doing, but as he took hold I lost mine — then regained it. With God's grace, I succeeded in inching my way up on the ice, Jón crawling backwards until the ice was sufficiently strong to support the two of us.

Much can escape one's mind in a moment of panic. Jón had a long cord in his bag which he could so easily have thrown to me. As for me, I felt no fear while I was in; my mind simply turned to my little Gunna, with the thought that she was too young to loose me there in the water.

Then we returned to the house where previously we had been refused admission. Jón threw his weight about and said that we should force entrance, if nec-

essary. Certainly I was in no condition to proceed any farther. I felt stiff and my clothes had frozen so that I was scarcely able to walk. This time however, we were made welcome, and a good fire was started. Jón loaned me clothes until I had dried my own.

During my experience I had not felt fear, but at this point a strong reaction set in. I began to shiver, as if at death's door, and I did not sleep a wink that night. On the following day we continued on our way to Winnipeg.

The work which I was able to get was mainly at sawing wood. Employment was scarce, and wages low. We returned home before Christmas.

It was then that I commenced fishing at the mouth of the river, a practice which I continued during my years in the colony. I did not leave my nets to lie in the water without frequent inspection, for this practice caused nets to deteriorate quickly.

We had to make every effort to economize, but how patiently we endured our difficulties, toil, and privations. There was no expectation of comfort.

In the following spring, my Guðmundur, along with other children, was confirmed by the Reverend H. Briem.

During the last two summers I earned a considerable amount in Winnipeg. I worked at unloading boats, employment not deemed very genteel, and at building houses. At that time was begun the construction of the railway bridge and the erection of the large Hudson's Bay Company building, the Bank of Montreal, and many other fine buildings.

In March, 1881, we left New Iceland. We obtained an ox from Albert Thiðrikson, and also a rickety sleigh, on which we stowed all our belongings. There was a general shortage of hay that year, due to floods, and my small supply was spoiled by the wet. Consequently, I had a cow and a heifer in tow, in addition to my own cows, including Búbót, who had become lean. A beautiful red heifer calf I had been compelled to sell to Guðmundur Nord-

mann to obtain two dollars towards expenses on the way in. Actually, the price agreed on was four dollars, but Guðmundur was able to pay only half that sum.

In our group were Arni Sveinsson, Thordur, and myself. The journey to Winnipeg took two days.

We had no assured employment awaiting us in Winnipeg. Besides, I had to return the ox. Thus I found myself once again on the road to the settlement. In order to help to defray expenses, I transported goods for Friðjón. The round trip took five days, and all this time I was able to secure only snatches of sleep.

I left Skógar for my return journey late in the day. On the sleigh were loaded the chickens, cooped up in a cupboard, and odds and ends which I had previously left behind.

This time, also, I had to leave behind all my lumber, together with fifty to sixty well-squared logs which had cost me many an hour of work. There was a considerably large stock of the lumber, for it was my intention to build a large and well-constructed house. I had to leave, too, the house, with the attached shed and all the windows, as well as a number of implements. All this would be subject to depredations. It did not take long for abandoned houses to be cleared of all worthwhile articles left in them. Albert promised to bring me some of the things which I was compelled to leave behind, but this he failed to do. It was with a keen sense of poignancy that I left, close to night-fall, pulling a sled, and travelling past many vacant and deserted houses.

It hastened my journey not a little that all my best friends had left, and also the fact that when I left my family in Winnipeg they had as yet not obtained accommodation.

West of Selkirk, what with fatigue from travel and lack of sleep, I threw myself on the frozen ground for a rest. My circumstances were reminiscent of the time when I left the Old Country. Then I had gone without sleep for three

days; now it was five, and my fatigue correspondingly greater.

I was fortunate that in the course of the day I caught up with a team, and obtained a little rest. Presently my fellow-traveller turned in at an hotel and I continued on my way. On parting, he treated me to a drink and this braced me up. That same day, in full daylight, I reached Winnipeg.

My Valdis had secured accommodation over a laundry, and had moved in. I was glad of the opportunity to rest.

Twenty-three years have passed, and since then I have not seen our old place.

At the time of writing, in 1904, my home is in Winnipeg.

#### TRANSLATOR'S CODA

Simon Simonson has told his story. It is obviously written without thought of publication; it is highly personal, and does not attempt to tell a comprehensive story of the settlement.

Since it is written from the autobiographical and not the broad historical point of view, other accounts of the time and place must be kept in mind in order to obtain a true final impression. The author is at times justly critical of the leaders. It should be borne in mind that at the time when the site of the settlement was chosen, it was proposed to build the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway through Selkirk, that among the few buildings erected in the fall of 1875 there was a school-house,

and that about the New Year Carrie Taylor was teaching a class of approximately twenty-five pupils; that despite the devastating small-pox epidemic of 1876—77, the settlers organized in February of 1877 a local government, and a formal and impressive constitution set forth clearly and concisely the duties of officials and made provision for collection of taxes, building of roads, sanitation, maintenance of records, and arbitration of disputes; that in 1878 *Framfari* had six hundred subscribers, three hundred in Canada and three hundred in Iceland. It should be noted here, too, that some members of the first group brought nets from Iceland, only the mesh proved too large for lake fishing.

Mrs. J. B. Skaptason, the author's daughter, places in a truer perspective the part played by the wives of the early settlers when she mentions that her mother assisted with the haying, on one occasion working in water up to mid-thigh.

Mrs. Skaptason states that when her parents moved to Winnipeg, the hard years were of the past. Her mother managed a boarding house, and during the first year in the city the combined earnings of husband and wife amounted to one thousand dollars.

This translation has been a labor of love and is a small tribute to the memory of the pioneers to whom we owe so much.

W. K.







